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SUBJECT: IEC PUBLICLY REAFFIRMS AUGUST 20 AS VOTING DAY

Classified By: CDA Christopher Dell for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Dr. Azizullah Ludin, senior Commissioner of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), on March 4 announced that, after the IEC had reviewed the President's February 28 decree, the date of presidential and provincial council elections remained August 20. For a packed audience of international and local journalists, Ludin, flanked by his fellow Commissioners, reviewed the political story of the date of elections from fall of 2007 to present, then turned to constitutional and legal arguments. Ludin based the case for August on the right of every Afghan to vote and the right of every Afghan to be a candidate, noting that weather, security, funding, and operational challenges made "free, fair, transparent, and universal" elections in spring impossible. When Al Jazeera-English asked if the IEC was "on a collision course" with Karzai, Ludin deftly replied that the IEC respected the President, his recent decree, and his responsibility to uphold the constitution. The IEC, Ludin said, was in agreement, and was upholding the constitutional right to universal franchise.

¶2. (C) UN SRSG Kai Eide on March 4 told the Charge that the Commissioners had had a "chaotic" meeting earlier on March 4 with President Karzai and agreement to re-affirm the August date started to unravel again. Ludin, with Kai's backing, rallied the group behind August 20 and a timely response to the February 28 presidential decree.

¶3. (C) Eide will issue a statement later today endorsing the IEC's stance on behalf of the international community. We understand that France and the EC are also planning statements and recommend that Washington also do so (proposed text emailed to Jones/Ensher.) Karzai is supposed to make a statement tomorrow accepting the IEC's position, triggering the next step in this process. With the question of the date put to rest (again), the focus will shift to the status of the government between May 22, when the president's term ends, and the election date. As messy and convoluted as this has been so far, it's likely to look tame in comparison to what comes next as the Afghans get into politicking in their national style.
DELL